

THE ECONOMY OF INDO-CHINA

for information. Others, less scrupulous and better informed, live by exploiting the discoveries of others.

Publicity, usually of an inaccurate kind, long served to keep public speculation at white heat. The smallest find was magnified by the local press. Petrol is a curious case in point. It had never been found in Upper Tonkin, but in the 1920*8 prospecting all over the world centred on petrol. In tropical forests spots are often found on the surface that were made by organic decomposition of a vegetable origin, but which were taken to indicate petrol. This was the origin of the wholly false legend, which grew up overnight, that Indo-China had a wealth of petrol resources.

The administration's role is very important in this business. Prospecting cannot be undertaken without a permit given out by the local officials for a restricted area. The fixed price is 500 francs, but with the inevitable formalities. By a 1912 decree perpetual possession of a mine may be granted but the owner must pay a 2 per cent tax on its produce. Certain regions are not open at all to prospecting, but these are very limited. The government's chief aim is to insure an exclusive right to search. Under Annamite law, the Emperor was sole proprietor of the soil and sub-soil. Severe punishments awaited those who tried to work mines, except that of Mong-Son which had been ceded to the Chinese. After the Protectorate was established the Emperor agreed to accept the French mining regulations. A prospector must indemnify the owner if he prospects on private property. For mines whose existence is already known, the government prefers disposal at public auction. Usually, however, the state takes a percentage on profits rather than work the mines directly.

Very early the government tried to prevent speculation by heavily taxing mines that were not being worked (1888). This long remained the regime until criticism became rife over the startling discrepancy between the number of prospecting permits issued and the number of mines under exploitation—1,224 to 215. This revelation led to a revision in 1912. With the completion of Tonkin's pacification^ mining had taken on new Mfe, and its growth would have forced a modification in the existing regulations. Mining products were reclassified. Foreigners were excluded from the ownership if not the benefits of Indo-Chinese mines. There was a restriction in the number of permits to be issued. Further regulations about the policing of quarries, safety rules, reports, and statistics from the Geographical Service, and analysis of minerals were forthcoming. In spite of the importance of the colony^ **wmc&i «cr**

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